

Senate Republicans fear ‘train wreck’ in September

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Sen. John McCain recently reflected on the first five months of GOP rule in Washington, ticking off the party’s greatest congressional achievements to date.

There’s the confirmation of Supreme Court justice Neil Gorsuch. There’s also the dozen Obama-era regulations that have been repealed. “I’m overjoyed. Sure. That’s what we promised,” McCain said with a tight smile. “I’m really happy.”

Then he paused.

“I was being sarcastic ... The fact is I’m disappointed,” the famously gruff Arizona Republican fumed in an interview late last month, calling his party’s governing plans a “train wreck” set to hit Congress in September.

“Everything piles up, we go to the edge of the cliff, shut down the government, then we have an omnibus or a continuing resolution where we can vote yes or no. No amendments, no improvements, nothing,” McCain added.

Concerns are rising in Washington that Congress may be headed toward the economic and political disaster of a debt default and a government shutdown later this year. And the chamber most likely to get Congress out of the jam — the Senate — is failing to live up to its moniker as the world’s greatest deliberative body.

Rather than a honeymoon with a new presidency and Republicans firmly in the majority, the Senate has become a grinding churn of nomination votes constantly delayed by Democrats, and partisan warfare with little bipartisan cooperation other than averting an April government shutdown.

There’s no budget, no funding levels for the fall and little talk between the two parties on how to avoid a shutdown and debt default in late summer or early fall, worrying senators in both parties.

“No meeting, no anything and no plan. I look at September and it’s just: How are we going to get that done?” said an exasperated Sen. Patty Murray of Washington state, the No. 3 Senate Democrat.

“When are we going to do the appropriations? We’re not talking about that,” moaned Sen. David Perdue (R-Ga.). “It’s gonna go to a [continuing resolution] or an omnibus. We get an up-or-down vote on the whole thing, which is what I’m yelling about.”

Instead of focusing on a bipartisan spending deal to avert the blunt impending budget cuts of sequestration and lift the debt ceiling, the GOP Congress has been cranking away at a partisan agenda of tax cutting, repealing Obamacare and rolling back Obama-era regulations. Republicans aren’t yet close on health care and have barely started on taxes, though GOP leaders insist that a vote on an Obamacare repeal measure will occur before August.

They won’t, however, guarantee that it will succeed.

“I’m very frustrated ... we’re going to do all these things by Sept. 30? Give me a break. We’re going to cut taxes, pass health care, set aside sequestration?” said Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.). “We should have an agenda. We know we’re not going to pass a budget with sequestration caps. I’m not.”

The hawkish South Carolina senator said he hopes to start bipartisan talks on a spending deal when Congress returns this week, and Republican leaders are hoping to get the Senate back attuned to legislating after a fallow five months of the new Congress.

There have been zero amendment votes on regular legislation, with only a non-binding budget vote-a-rama in January to satisfy enthusiasts of the chamber's often wide-ranging amendment process. It's the fewest such votes in a new Congress since 1981, a stark contrast to 69 amendment votes taken to date just two years ago, according to legislative statistics.

And while the Senate has passed more than 30 bills, most have been passed by unanimous consent, a procedure reserved for only the least controversial matters. The bulk of the Senate's legislating has been a rollback of President Barack Obama's legislation, with Gorsuch's confirmation the crown jewel of the Senate agenda.

South Dakota Sen. John Thune, the third-ranking Senate Republican, called the progress so far in the Senate "obviously sort of a mixed bag." He noted the Obama-era regulations rolled back by the Senate and the confirmation of Gorsuch, but added that on big-ticket bills, the Senate "had to wait on the House."

"So now, we're in the throes of trying to figure out health care reform," Thune said. "I think we'll get onto eventually the tax reform but we have to do a budget to do that, and we've got to start the appropriations process."

Still, Republicans generally blame Democrats for not allowing more to get done.

"We've done an awful lot, but the Democrats have stopped almost everything else. Anything," complained Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch, the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) was happy to shift the blame back on Republicans: "When the Republicans are willing to work with us, we get things done. When they're not willing to work with us, we don't get things done."

Democrats signaled earlier this year that they had little appetite to drag out debate for lower-profile nominations from President Donald Trump, yet they've forced the Senate to go through the procedural grinder for relatively obscure nominees such as John Sullivan for deputy secretary of state and Rachel Brand for associate attorney general.

Democrats have forced procedural votes on 26 nominations so far this year – a rapid pace that, according to the Pew Research Center, already surpasses nearly every single Congress since 1949, when the procedural maneuver first began being used on nominations. During the 113th Congress from 2013 to 2014, then-Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) was forced to tee up procedural votes on 150 nominations overall.

"Maybe they could stop using the filibuster on everything that moves," said Don Stewart, a spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.). "It doesn't have to be this way. Democrats have a choice in their behavior — they choose to attempt dysfunction. Despite that, legislation is moving."

Party leaders say that the dearth of bipartisan legislation will end soon, with consideration in June of a veterans' bill as well as possibly new Iran and Russia sanctions and extending user fees for the Food and Drug Administration — one of a number of looming deadlines that hit at the end of September.

"Hopefully when we come back from recess," said Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn of Texas of when the bipartisan legislating will begin. "The leader has asked the committee chairmen to process bills that we can pick up and hopefully have bipartisan support."

The debt limit is likely to require lifting before the August recess, a significant escalation of the looming default deadline, according to Republican sources. And rank-and-file Republicans are eager to make progress on major legislation such as tax reform — and are even lobbying others to cancel the lengthy August recess to get going on key GOP priorities.

"How can I go home and work the state in August when we're still sitting here with that yet to be done?" Perdue said. "My argument is, there are four or five weeks. Take three of those weeks and let's work tax to the ground."